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## **Tunnel Rats of El Paso enter... "The Tunnel Rat Zone"**

by Bruce Hill, Jr., USACE Public Affairs

Analogous with Rod Sterling's famed television episodes known as, "The Twilight Zone", exists another dimension.

It is a dimension of work that involves conduit or a tunnel, one that is periodically inspected by man. It runs underground and from the outside looking in, appears timeless as infinity.

It is the middle ground between darkness and light. Confining, it lies between the core of every man's irrational fear of becoming entrapped and the pinnacle of his goal... to reach the opposite end of the tunnel and

complete the inspection.

This is a dimension of the Tunnel Rat. It is an area we like to call...

The Tunnel Rat Zone.

Conduit inspectors, likened to Tunnel Rats of the Vietnam War, assigned to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Albuquerque District, made their way through thousands of feet of long, dark and narrow conduit in El Paso, Texas for the initial inspection of the flood damage reduction project that took place in September.

**(See Tunnel Rats, page 13)**

## Tunnel Rats... *continued from cover*

On hand, were several representatives from the City of El Paso to assist with project access, note recommendations, and provide feedback on the performance of the project during the flooding that occurred there in August. (See RipRap July – September issue referencing the August El Paso floods).

“After a safety briefing by Jim Jaffe, (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Safety Manager), the conduit inspectors (six from the Corps) and members of the City of El Paso, proceeded to observe and inspect a 96-inch diameter inlet conduit, which was a walk-in-the-park compared to the 4,000-foot long, 48-inch diameter outlet conduit inspected next,” said Shelley Ramos, USACE Civil Engineer, Geotechnical Engineering Section.

Russ Jaramillo, Civil Engineer, Emergency Management Branch, and Steve Thomas, Structural Engineer, Facilities Section, Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Estok, District Engineer, and Jaffe braved the much narrower conduit.

“Jaramillo and Thomas alternated between skateboarding on one knee and walking, while Jaffe and Lieutenant Colonel Estok walked hunched over for the entire length of the conduit,” said Ramos.

Inspectors ride skateboards on their backs through smaller diameter conduits when walking is not an option.

“Wildlife, including bats, rats, snakes, cougars, and the elusive wild cow have been known to frequent conduits,” said Ramos. “However, wildlife encounters during this inspection were limited to cockroaches crawling on necks and crawdads crunching underfoot,” (or under wheel).

Initial and annual inspections are a requirement of the Corps to observe potential deficiencies within flood damage reduction systems, including conduits. This particular inspection reflects a cohesive team effort with the owner/operator of the project, in this case the City of El Paso who, along with the Corps, epitomize the quality of life-cycle relationships that exist with local sponsors.

Under the Dam Safety Program, initial inspections of Carolina and Lomaland Basins in El Paso were coordinated by the Corps geotechnical engineering section, which is required prior to turning the flood control projects over to the local sponsor, in this case the City of El Paso.

Once the projects are turned over to the local sponsor, further inspections by the Corps will be completed annually under the direction of Emergency Management Branch,” said Ramos. “Which falls under the Inspection of Completed Works program, hence Russ Jaramillo’s (and Lieutenant Colonel Estok’s) participation to become more familiar with the project.”

“My presence was to understand the program as it currently

exists, what we actually do on the ground in working with sponsors and what the end product of the inspection will be, so I gain a perspective on how we execute.” said Lieutenant Colonel Estok. What is learned will likely be implemented into a recent call for change made by Headquarters USACE.

A year following Hurricane Katrina’s disastrous impact on the Gulf Coast in 2005, Headquarters USACE released what is called the 12 Actions for Change, which is a blueprint to help the Corps focus on the transformation of priorities, processes, and planning to more effectively execute support to the nation.


“To be in accordance with the 12 Actions for Change, it will be a priority for USACE and the Albuquerque District in the near future,” said Estok.

To ensure the safety, reliability and functionality of the nations vast flood damage reduction systems, the Corps will continue to inspect them even if it means crawling or skateboarding the long, dark, narrow and somewhat eerie confines of conduit. They have what it takes to reach the other end, even a little humor.

“Three men over 40 and I, the baby District commander, spent two hours in close quarters duck walking and skateboarding through a nearly one-mile conduit, three and one half feet in diameter,” said Lieutenant Colonel Estok. “The unflappable leadership of Jim Jaffe and his trusty oxygen meter ensured safety from start to finish.”

“Jaffe was present primarily for the confined space conduit entry,” said Ramos. “He was equipped with an oxygen meter, basic first aid and communications equipment. Following a brief trigger of the oxygen sensor’s alarm, Jaramillo kept the spirits of the team high by providing comedic motivation to reach their final destination. But the inspectors vowed to not disclose the contents of his profound motivational speech.

“I don’t think I said anything,” said Jaramillo.

Apparently what happens in the conduit stays in the conduit. 

*A note from the editor:*

*Tunnel Rats were American, Australian and New Zealander soldiers who performed underground search and destroy missions during the Vietnam War. In the course of the war, the Viet Cong created very extensive underground tunnels. Whenever troops would uncover a tunnel, Tunnel Rats were sent in to kill any buried enemy and to plant explosives to destroy the tunnels. – Source: Wikipedia the free encyclopaedia.*

*Look for information on the 12 Actions for Change in the next issue of the RipRap*

## Quote of the quarter

*Never worry about the size of your Christmas tree. In the eyes of children, they are all 30 feet tall.*

~ Larry Wilde, The Merry Book of Christmas